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MUDDLE ANNIE

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MUDDLE ANNIE

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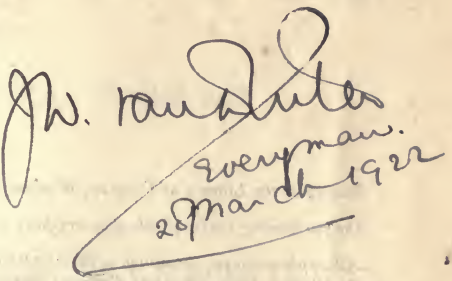

MUDDLE-ANNIE

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MUDDLE-ANNIE

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

BY

HAROLD CHAPIN

GOWANS & GRAY, LTD., LONDON AND GLASGOW
LEROY PHILLIPS, BOSTON, U.S.A.
1921

Produced for the first time on any stage by the Scottish Repertory Theatre Company, under the direction of Mr. Alfred Wareing, *at the Royalty Theatre, Glasgow, on March* 13*th*, 1911, *with the following cast:*

Jenny	-	Miss Calypso Valetta.
Mabel	-	Miss Muriel Pope.
George Rose	-	Mr. Charles Francis.
Annie	-	Miss Irene Clarke.
Ethel	-	Miss Hilda Honiss.
Albert Broad		Mr. Cyril Griffiths.
Mrs. Wright		Miss Gwynneth Galton.

MUDDLE-ANNIE

CHARACTERS

MRS. WRIGHT.—*A stout, motherly, old party. Pleasant, unintelligent and very dignified.*

ANNIE.—*Her eldest daughter. Under the average height. Age* 30 *but looks older. Bad figure, ill-worn clothes, and awkward, nervous, manner. A pleasant voice.*

EFF.—*The second daughter. Age* 24. *Bright, tidy and sensible.*

MABEL.—*The third daughter. A pretty girl of* 21. *Wears too much cheap jewelry, and is a little spiteful in manner.*

JENNY.—*The youngest. A keen, clever, pretty youngster of* 17. *She walks with crutches, but her lameness is not marked. She dresses more prettily than her sisters, and has far the keenest wit of the family. Irrepressible.*

ALBERT BROAD.—*A young policeman walking out with Eff. Wears ordinary tweed suit, and heavy boots. A pleasant, rather stolid young man with a tanned face and a slight fair moustache.*

GEORGE ROSE.—*A dark man of* 30. *Very good*

imitation of a gentleman. Black frock-coat, white slip vest, patent boots. He assumes an air of distinction which is not diminished by his cockney accent. Wears a very heavy black moustache.

The action takes place in the parlour of a little house in Harlesden on a November evening at about half past five.

The Stage is discovered dark except for the firelight. Mabel and Jenny seated in arm-chairs before fire; Mabel slightly above fire about a yard out from and facing it; Jenny in smaller arm-chair which is below fire with its back to footlights. Jenny is reclining over arm of chair, her crutches by her side. A magazine is on floor and a copy of "Forget-Me-Not" is on Mabel's lap.

After a pause Jenny speaks without lifting her head.

JENNY

Mabe, Mabe! Stop reading.

MABEL

I wasn't reading.

JENNY

Well, stop trying to in this light. You'll ruin your eyes like poor—

MABEL

I wasn't trying to either. I was only watching the fire. *(Sighs deeply.)*

JENNY

(Vigorously.) Oh, shut up sighing— What's the time ?

MABEL

(Looking up at clock on mantelpiece.) It's too dark to see. Must be past tea-time, though. Shall I light up ?

JENNY

If you like.

MABEL

It seems a shame.

JENNY

What does ?

MABEL

To light up and spoil it all. I love the dark and the firelight.

JENNY

(Groaning energetically.) Oh, oh, oh ! All right —let poor Annie come in with the tea-things and fall all over everything in the dark. *I* don't care.

MABEL

(Jumping up and fumbling on mantelshelf for matches.) I can't find the matches. Mr. Rose will be sure to have some. He'll be down in a minute.

JENNY

Where is he ?

MABEL

Upstairs lying down.

JENNY

Lazy brute!

MABEL

(Shocked.) Jenny, how can you? He is not lazy. He works terribly hard—with his brains, too. You know what brain fag is, don't you?

JENNY

Yes:—Humbug! I don't believe in his beastly brains.

MABEL

Jenny!

JENNY

I don't. He just wants to look pale and interesting to poor Annie.

MABEL

I don't see where the "poor Annie" comes in! Why should he go to the trouble for Annie?

JENNY

(Critically.) I believe you're jealous.

MABEL

Jealous indeed! And of *Annie*! *(Rattles matchbox and crosses to door.)* I'll light up in the hall first.

[*She opens door and goes out. Sound of a match striking, and a hat falling from hat-rack.*

MABEL

Oh, Jenny!

JENNY

Well?

MABEL

I've knocked down George's hat that was on the hat-stand, and—I believe I've stepped on it!

JENNY

(Laughing.) Good job.

MABEL

Oh, Jenny, you wouldn't laugh if it was his new, *top*-hat!

JENNY

I should. I should *yell.*

[*Sound of match striking again. A light flares up in hall throwing a beam of light across stage through door.*

MABEL

(In horrified tones.) Jenny!

JENNY

(*Impatiently.*) Well!

MABEL

It *was* the top-hat!

[*Jenny laughs. Mabel re-enters carrying crushed silk hat.*

MABEL

Oh, Jenny, you are cruel to laugh. I shall have to tell him. Oh, how awful!

[*Sound of footsteps outside door.*

MABEL

Oh, here he is—Oh, George—

[*George Rose enters and stands in door. Mabel takes a step towards him and pauses at corner of table.*

GEORGE

Well?

MABEL

I've smashed your hat—your best hat!

GEORGE

(*Taking hat from her*). Oh, never mind that, little girl. (*Pats her forgivingly on shoulder.*)

MABEL

How good you are! Of course I'll buy you a new one.

GEORGE

Nonsense.

MABEL

Oh, but I will! I know you can't afford—

GEORGE

Never mind what you know. You can make up for it another way. I fine you a kiss—no, two kisses. (*He puts his arm around her waist and kisses her. She pushes him away with a gesture of warning which he does not notice.*) What's wrong? I shall make it three if—

MABEL

Sh——sh! (*She points to Jenny who is watching them calmly over arm of chair.*)

GEORGE

(*Stepping quickly away from Mabel and coming down to lower corner of table.*) Hullo, Jenny!

JENNY

(*Unexpressively.*) Hullo.

GEORGE

Not used to having a brother-in-law about the place yet, are you? Soon be your brother-in-law now. Privileged people, aren't they?

[*Mabel fetches lamp from sideboard and lights it during following.*

JENNY

Are they?

GEORGE

Yes, of course. Kiss their sisters-in-law good morning, and all that sort of thing. I shall soon be Mabe's brother-in-law now, you know.

JENNY

And *mine*! Come and kiss me.

GEORGE

All the pleasure in the world. (*Crosses in front of table to Jenny; bends and pecks at her cheek.*) There! (*Goes to other arm-chair, flings cushions out of it on to sofa and prepares to settle himself comfortably.*)

JENNY

(*Very thoughtfully.*) Is that a brother-in-law's kiss?

[*Mabel lights lamp.*

GEORGE

(*Sitting.*) Umhum.

JENNY

Well, you didn't seem to kiss Mabe that way, and it doesn't make me say "Sh——sh" and stop you,

[*Mabel nervously rattles lamp-chimney.*

or go all shaky, either.

[*Enter Annie carrying tray laden with tea-things. George rises and, with ostentatious courtesy, helps her to place tray on side-board.*

ANNIE

(*Looking up at George shyly.*) Thank you, George.

GEORGE

(*Returning to chair.*) Don't thank me, Annie dear. It's a man's duty to—

JENNY

Oh, shut up! You've said all that before.

ANNIE

(*Taking table-cloth from sideboard.*) Don't mind her, George.

GEORGE

Mind Jenny? No. *You* understand. (*Holds lamp while Annie and Mabel spread cloth.*)

ANNIE

Indeed I do.

[*The cloth being spread, George replaces lamp and returns to his arm-chair. He stands for a moment watching Annie and Mabel busily bringing things from sideboard to table.*

GEORGE

(*Approvingly*) I love to see you busy, Annie dear. (*Sits.*) A woman should be always busy.

JENNY

She generally is. Anyway Annie generally is.

[*Annie, in laying table, comes to arm of George's chair. He puts an arm out and draws her to him.*

GEORGE

Annie is my ideal of a perfect woman. (*Pecks at her cheek.*)

JENNY

(*With marked emphasis.*) Er—brother-in-law.

GEORGE

(*Startled.*) What?

JENNY

Oh, nothing. I just wanted to see if it would remind you too. Now about kissing—

GEORGE

(*To Annie, who is once more laying table*). Jenny has got her eye on me. She caught me kissing Mabe, and she's made up her mind that I'm a fearful rake. Haven't you, Jenny?

JENNY

No. Not exactly.

MABEL

I had smashed George's new hat.

GEORGE

Yes, and I fined her a kiss—

JENNY

Two kisses.

GEORGE

(*Laughing it off.*) Very well—two kisses. You don't mind, Annie, do you?

ANNIE

(*Smiling at him trustfully.*) Mind? No.

GEORGE

Yes, I think you can trust your sister.

ANNIE

And I know I can trust you, dear.

GEORGE

Thank you. I only troubled to tell you because Jenny saw us, and you know what mischief-makers can do.

[*Annie goes to sideboard for tea-pot. George speaks under his breath to Jenny.*

GEORGE

I think that settles you, Miss Sneak.

JENNY

(*Grimacing at him.*) Yes, brother-in-law.

[*Annie brings tea-pot from sideboard to table. She lifts lid just before she puts it down.*

ANNIE

Oh, what—? (*Pours from tea-pot into cup.*) Yes. Oh, however could I be so silly!

MABEL

What is it?

ANNIE

I have put in the hot water and forgotten the tea again.

[*All laugh.*

MABEL

Muddle-Annie! (*Sits in chair below table.*)

ANNIE

Yes. I can't think how—(*Pauses confusedly.*)

JENNY

Well, that's soon unmuddled, anyhow.

GEORGE

(*Jumping up.*) Yes, indeed. Tell me where the tea is and I'll put some in.

MABEL

Nice tea you'd make.

ANNIE

You can't make tea like that, dear.

JENNY

(*Above the others*) Oh, these men !

[*George takes tea-pot in his hand and stands above table looking at Annie.*

ANNIE

You can't make tea like that, George, dear.

GEORGE

Can't I ? Why ?

ANNIE

The water's off the boil—Oh ! I'd better do it. (*Takes tea-pot and crosses to door. She turns again at she opens it and says shyly*) You can come and help—if you like.

GEORGE

Shan't I be in the way rather ?

JENNY

It's a man's duty to—

[*George jumps up angrily and crosses to door as Annie exits.*

GEORGE

I was only afraid I might be more trouble than—
(*Closes door behind him as he exits.*)

MABEL

(*After a moment's pause.*) Annie simply runs after him.

JENNY

Does she? Well, she's caught him, anyway, and somebody else hasn't.

MABEL

What do you mean by that, Jenny?

JENNY

What I say.

MABEL

If you think I've been running after Mr. Rose—

JENNY

I don't think, I jolly well know. But you haven't caught him and Annie has.

MABEL

Do you know why Annie has?

JENNY

Yes, rather! Three-hundred-and-thirty-three pounds, six bob and something.

MABEL

Oh, Jenny. What an awful thing to say! Fancy thinking that George would marry anyone for their money. And only three hundred pounds, too!

JENNY

Only! I like that. Don't you just wish you had it? Only!

MABEL

Oh, I know it looks a lot to us, but George is used to having plenty. He's quite a gentleman. What should a gentleman want with three hundred pounds?

JENNY

I've noticed that it's the gentlemen who want money a sight more than any one else. And they seem to care least how they get it.

MABEL

(*Intensely shocked.*) Jenny!

JENNY

No, I don't think much of your "gentleman." He's not in love with poor Ann really.

MABEL

In love with Annie—(*Rises and goes mysteriously to*

door, which she closes tight, and then returns to chair above table nearest to Jenny.) Jenny, if I tell you something will you swear never to repeat it ?

JENNY

(*Provokingly.*) Nope.

MABEL

(*Rising indignantly.*) All right. I don't want to tell you.

JENNY

Don't then.

MABEL

(*Hesitating.*) But you do poor George a great injustice. Shall I tell you something— ?

JENNY

Oh, if you like.

MABEL

You promise ?

JENNY

No I don't. If you can't trust me, don't tell me.

[*After a second's hesitation Mabel reseats herself.*

MABEL

(*Leaning forward and speaking very impressively.*) Well, George isn't in love with Annie at all. He's in love with me.

[*Jenny laughs amiably.*

MABEL

Oh don't laugh. You'll know what it means to have a breaking heart when you get older.

JENNY

Oh, rats.

MABEL

You will. I hope you won't, but I'm sure you will. I—Where was I? Oh, I know. Of course I fell in love with George as soon as I came back from Herne Bay, and he loved me at first sight too—

JENNY

Of course.

MABEL

But he'd been here nearly a month, and was already engaged to Ann. So of course he was too honourable to speak. He is very honourable.

JENNY

Very. How did you find out, then?

MABEL

It's a wonder I did. I just kept quiet and hoped that time—I believe you're laughing.

JENNY

Oh, go on.

MABEL

Well, last Wednesday, when you were all out he told me that he loved me—

JENNY

I thought he was too honourable to speak.

MABEL

(*Rising.*) Jenny, it is absolutely no use trying to tell you anything. You have no—no *perception.* He told me he loved me, but that he must never speak—(*Pauses and looks reproachfully at Jenny, who is wiping her eyes.*)

JENNY

No. I'm not laughing. I'm crying. It's the smoke. Go on.

MABEL

(*Shortly.*) Well, all he said was that he had proposed to poor Ann in a moment of pity for her lonely state, and that he could not go back on his word, now, but that he would pay for his moment's weakness all his life. He said that he had made a terrible mistake, but a gentleman should stand by his mistakes.

JENNY

That's a bit rough on the mistakes, sometimes.

MABEL

You're a little beast, and I'm sorry I told you. (*Goes to door and opens it.*)

JENNY

Half a minute.

MABEL

(*Pausing.*) Well?

JENNY

Did he—?

MABEL

(*Quickly.*) Kiss me? Yes, he kissed me once—if you want to know.

JENNY

I don't. What I do want to know is: did he borrow any money?

[*Mabel exits with great dignity and bangs door after her. Jenny nods slowly and wisely to herself.*

JENNY

He did.

[*A double knock heard.*

JENNY

Oh, bother. I'm not going.

[*Annie heard passing door. A burst of "Hullo's" as the front door opens.*

EFF

(*Off*). Here we are. Tea ready? Bert is dying for a cup.

ANNIE

(*Off*). Just ready.

[*Enter Eff followed by Bert. She flops wearily into chair nearest door. Bert stands nearer door taking coat off. Annie stands in doorway.*

ANNIE

Let's have your coat, Bert. How did you like the piece? (*Takes coat into hall and returns.*)

BERT

Not bad—was it, Ethel?

EFF

I loved it. Oh, I do want my tea.

ANNIE

You poor thing. I'll get it. (*Exits.*)

BERT

(*Coming in front of table to Jenny, shaking hands with her and then standing with back to fire.*) Hullo, Jenny, how goes it?

JENNY

Alright. What was the piece like?

BERT

Fine—wasn't it, Eff?

EFF

Tea, tea, tea! Oh, I am tired.

BERT

I ought to have taken you to Lyon's or somewhere. It's a long way to come home.

EFF

It's a beast of a way.

[*Enter Annie with tea-pot.*

EFF

Thank goodness.

Enter George.

EFF

Hullo, George. Do you know Mr. Broad?

GEORGE

I have not met——

EFF

Bert. (*Bert rises.*) Mr. Rose, my sister Annie's fiancé—this is Mr. Broad—my gentleman friend.

GEORGE

(*Affably.*) Pleased to meet you. (*They shake hands across corner of table.*)

JENNY

(*Rising*) Do let's have tea. Mabe, call—why, where's Mabe? (*Sits in chair at corner of table nearest fire, facing footlights.*)

EFF

(*Going to door and calling.*) Mabel! Mabel! Come along, do. (*Returning and standing by chair at corner of table nearest door.*) She's coming.

JENNY

Well, sit down, then. I'm simply dying! Bert, fetch yourself that chair.

[*Bert brings chair from back and places it between them. Eff sits.*)

ANNIE

Mother'll be down in a minute. (*Fetches chair from back and places it at upper end of table.*)

BERT

(*Sitting.*) There we are! A rose between two thorns.

JENNY

(*Snappishly.*) Don't talk so much.

EFF

Try not to be funny, Bert, just for a change.

BERT

(*Under his voice.*) A lamb between two wolves.

EFF

You start pouring out, Annie.

JENNY

No!

MABEL

Oh, no! Not Annie—she can't—

EFF

Surely Annie can pour out tea for once.

[*Enter mother.*

MOTHER

(*Entering.*) Yes, indeed. You pour out, Annie—

MABEL

Oh, mother, no! You know she always—

MOTHER

Mabel, you know Annie wouldn't be half so nervous if you didn't worry her with your "Muddle-Annie" all the time.

[*Annie sits at head of table and starts awkwardly pouring out tea. Mother makes her way around back of table to fire. She pauses and pats Bert on the back.*

MOTHER

Well, Halbert, how did you like the piece? (*Puling large armchair up to table.*) Reach me one of those cushions, will you?

[*Bert fetches cushion from sofa, mother pats it up and puts in armchair and sits. Tea has meanwhile been served to all but Mabel and George. The rest are helping themselves to bread and butter Mabel takes her cup from George who is passing it. She sips it.*

MABEL

Oh, Annie! You've been and given me sugar.

ANNIE

(*In surprise.*) I thought you liked it sweet!

MABEL

(*Reproachfully.*) You *know* I don't.

ANNIE

(*Pouring out George's tea and giving it to him*). I

know *you* don't take sugar, George. But, Mabel, I'm sure you always used to.

MOTHER

So she did. She suddenly cried off it three or four weeks ago.

JENNY

(*Distinctly.*) The week after George came to lodge.

GEORGE

Sugar is rarely taken by persons of taste. Very rarely.

JENNY

About once in three weeks, eh?

[*Bert chokes and has to be patted on the back.*

EFF

Don't you find the fire hot on your back, mother, dear?

MOTHER

It is rather.

MABEL

Move around a bit. (*Edges her chair closer to George's to make room.*)

MOTHER

I'll move nearer my baby—eh, Jenny.

[*Moves her chair a little up stage. The lower corner of the table is thereby left vacant to the audience, all the characters except Eff being in easy view.*

MOTHER

Everybody got all they want ?

GEORGE

Yes, thanks.

JENNY

You aren't everybody, are you ?

BERT

(*To George across table.*) Excuse me—I didn't quite catch your name.

EFF

George Rose.

JENNY

Mr. George Rose—Gentleman !

MOTHER

Be quiet, Jenny.

BERT

(*Still addressing George.*) We've not met before by any chance, I suppose ? I seem to know your face.

GEORGE

I've no recollection of meeting you anywhere. I've been abroad a good deal lately.

BERT

Oh, then, of course—but your face is very familiar. (*Stares hard at George.*)

GEORGE

(*Fingering moustache.*) Indeed?

BERT

(*Suddenly.*) I'll have another cup of tea, please, Annie.

ANNIE

Pass your cup. Jenny?

JENNY

(*Passing Bert's cup.*) No thanks—I mean not *yet.*

MOTHER

How are you getting on, Halbert?

BERT

Mustn't grumble.

MOTHER

Not a sergeant, yet, I suppose?

BERT

(*Laughing*). Oh, come! (*Takes tea as it is passed up to him.*)

MOTHER

(*Very impressively re-introducing Albert to George.*) Albert is a Policeman.

GEORGE

Indeed, how interesting.

JENNY

Be nice to have a Policeman in the family, won't it, mother ?

MOTHER

Jenny, be quiet. You're always talking. (*Surveying table.*) A nice little lot, aren't they, George ?

GEORGE

(*Not understanding.*) A nice lot ?

MOTHER

My girls.

GEORGE

(*Emphatically.*) Very.

BERT

I should think they are. They do you credit, Mrs. Wright !

MOTHER

Thank you, Halbert. I feel they do.

BERT

Especially this one. (*Laughingly squeezes Eff's arm.*)

JENNY

Here, I say. Don't slight the rest of us. Mother was discussing us as a group not—

BERT

Sorry, Jenny, but I'm not greedy.

MOTHER

You talk too much, Jenny. That's part of what I'm proud of—that each of my girls in turn seems to be finding some young man who likes her better than all the rest. It wouldn't be much use bringing up a family of girls so that every young man that called wanted the lot. He couldn't have them if he did. That's where I feel they do me credit. They're sensible, bright—

ANNIE

All except one.

JENNY

Oh, be quiet, Ann.

MABEL

One?

ANNIE

Yes. Muddle-Annie.

MOTHER

Don't be silly, Annie. I'm proud of my girls, George. Four girls take some bringing up. And my husband dead these ten years.

EFF

Bert, don't stare at Mr. Rose.

BERT

I'm sorry. Was I?

EFF

Yes, you were. Drink your tea and don't.

BERT

I was listening to your mother. You were saying—?

MOTHER

Only that I was glad to see my girls getting married and settled down. It's something to feel that when I'm dead and in my grave there'll still be some of my own flesh and blood carrying on the same old games I carried on when I was a girl.

ANNIE

Mother! Don't talk like that.

MOTHER

Why not, if I don't mind.

JENNY

(*Pulling Bert around and looking at him.*) How's the moustache getting on, Bert?

EFF

Don't, you'll make him nervous.

JENNY

No, I shan't. I'm only taking a sisterly interest in his appearance You don't mind, do you, Bert?

BERT

Not a bit.

JENNY

There's a brave Policeman for you. (*Critically.*) It takes a long time.

BERT

(*Fingering upper lip.*) Oh, I don't know.

GEORGE

Do you know how to raise a nice moustache?

BERT.

(*Deeply interested.*) No. How?

GEORGE

Lift it gently by the ends.

BERT

(*Doubtfully.*) Lift it?

JENNY

He's trying to be funny. It was in "Answers."

[*All laugh.*

BERT

(*Slowly.*) Speaking of moustaches—I wonder how you'd look without one.

GEORGE

I've worn one for so long.

BERT

(*Still slowly and thoughtfully.*) A moustache hides the corners of the mouth. People look quite different with the corners of their mouths

covered. There's a lot of character—(*Suddenly turning to Mother.*) Mrs. Wright!

MOTHER

Don't jump at me.

BERT

Sorry. Mrs. Wright, it's your duty to study the characters of your girls' young men. Cruelty is one of the things that only show in the corners of the mouth.

JENNY

(*Laughing.*) Here, here, George, go and get shaved at once.

EFF

Don't be silly, Jenny.

MOTHER

Jenny !

ANNIE

Jenny, don't be rude.

JENNY

I won't have a brother-in-law with cruel corners to his mouth. George, if you don't get a shave at once, I shall refuse my consent.

BERT

(*Laughing.*) Better get a shave, George.

GEORGE

My name is Mr. Rose.

ANNIE

Don't tease him.

BERT

Then I suggest a compromise. Lift up the ends. Mrs. Wright—

MOTHER

George, if you don't I shall come and do it for you.

[*Rises and leans mightily over table.*

EFF

Look out, Mother. You'll upset everything.

[*Annie leans forward and lifts one end of George's moustache.*

ANNIE

There! They're not a bit cruel.

[*George pulls angrily away.*

ANNIE

You're not angry, are you? I only did it for a bit of fun, dear.

MOTHER

(*Sitting again.*) If you can't take a bit of chaff, George—

BERT

(*Taking no more interest in the subject.*) I'll have some more tea, please, Annie.

EFF

(*Taking his cup.*) Why you haven't finished this, not *nearly*.

BERT

Er—no—I mean Jenny wants another cup, don't you, Jenny?

JENNY

Please. (*Passes cup.*)

ANNIE

Mother?

MOTHER

A drop more, please. (*Passes cup.*) There, you're getting along all right.

EFF

Of course she is. (*Hands Annie her cup.*)

MOTHER

You'll soon have your own tea-table, now, eh?

GEORGE

Yes, indeed she will.

[*George places his cup before Annie. She now has four cups before her which she proceeds to fill.*

MOTHER

Muddle-Annie has managed to beat you girls after all.

MABEL

Yes, just fancy.

EFF

Remember the way we used to call out "Muddle-Annie" whenever she muddled anything. Little beasts we were.

JENNY

We still do.

MOTHER

I believe it's that, that makes her so nervous.

ANNIE

(*Awkwardly.*) Oh, I don't mind, now.

[*Hands George cup of tea.*

MABEL

No, of course not. She's used to it. Aren't you, Annie.

ANNIE

Oh, yes. [*Passes cup to Jenny.*

MABEL

Why only to-day she brought up the tea-pot—

JENNY

(*Fiercely*) Shut up, Mabe.

[*Annie gives George a second cup which he takes absently.*

MABEL

(*Glaring at Jenny.*) I wasn't talking to you.

MOTHER

Girls, girls! Don't wrangle. What did you do, Annie?

ANNIE

(*Awkwardly.*) I—Oh—I brought up the—I forgot.

[*Hands George a third cup which he starts to take and then notices that he has two others before him.*

GEORGE

(*Holding the third cup in his hand.*) Really Annie, I don't want three cups of tea!

[*A general laugh. Mabel says, "Muddle-Annie." After a second's hesitation Annie joins in the laugh.*

ANNIE

How silly of me!

JENNY

That's you all talking about her.

GEORGE

Now I wonder which is mine. (*Starts tasting teas.*)

ANNIE

Yours will be the one without sugar.

GEORGE

I believe they've all got sugar.

ANNIE

Oh, I am so sorry.

MOTHER

When you've done tasting my tea, George, perhaps—

[*The teas are distributed to their rightful owners.*

MOTHER

Well, Annie may muddle the tea-things, but she managed to keep on the right side of your uncle Halfred, and that's more than any of the others of you could do.

MABEL

Uncle was a pig.

ANNIE

Mabe, he wasn't.

MABEL

Of course you'd stick up for him.

MOTHER

And of course she ought to.

EFF

I think we were the pigs to Uncle.

JENNY

He-ar, he-ar! Annie was the only one who would go to see him, and I'm jolly glad he left her something for being so decent. Annie, your health! Good luck to you! (*Drinks.*) Ugh! I've got the one without sugar.

[*All laugh.*

EFF

(*Passing Jenny a lump of sugar.*) It isn't as if Uncle had absolutely forgotten us. We had our bangles.

BERT

Bangles?

EFF

Yes, didn't I tell you? Besides leaving Annie the money he left us each something. Jenny and Mabe and I had bangles. (*Pulls at hers.*)

JENNY

Gold, too. And jolly heavy.

EFF

Yes, they were his mother's.

JENNY

(*Slipping hers off and passing it round for inspection.*) Here's mine.

BERT

(*Passing it on.*) Very nice too.

EFF

I can't get mine off. It's just the same as Jenny's. See? Mabe's is quite different, though.

MOTHER

Show Halbert yours, Mabel.

MABEL

I haven't got mine on.

ANNIE

Not got it on? Why, you were so fond of it.

MABEL

I forgot to put it on when I washed my hands. I must have left it upstairs, I can't remember where.

[*George squeezes Mabel's hand beside chair.*

JENNY

(*Suddenly.*) I can. It was on the corner of the mantelpiece. I saw it there. I'll fetch it. (*Reaches for crutches.*)

MABEL

Oh don't bother. It may not be there.

JENNY

Oh, but I saw it.

MABEL

No, I'm sure I didn't leave it on the mantelpiece.

JENNY

You said you didn't know where you had left it.

MABEL

Neither I do, but I'm sure it wasn't there.

ANNIE

Had I better cut some more bread and butter, Mother?

MOTHER

I don't think so, dear. Anybody want any more?

GEORGE

No, thanks.

JENNY

Here, give me back my bangle. I've lost things before.

[*George passes back Jenny's bangle.*

EFF

You're very quiet, Bert.

BERT

Yes, I'm wondering.

EFF

Wondering? What at?

BERT

Mrs. Wright. I believe you're an authority on etiquette.

MOTHER

I don't know about that, Halbert. But I certainly do know what good be'aviour should be.

BERT

I'm sure you do. I wonder whether you'd mind settling a—a little *argument* for me.

MOTHER

I'm sure, Halbert—

BERT

It's like this. One of the chaps at the station is in a bit of a difficulty, and he asked my opinion. Of course I don't know much about manners—

JENNY

He-ar, he-ar!

EFF

Be quiet, Jenny. Go on, Bert.

BERT

Well, I should like the opinion of someone with more experience in society to—to sort of back me up.

MOTHER

(*Intently.*) I see.

BERT

It's like this—My friend—

JENNY

What's his name?

BERT

Eh?

JENNY

What's your friend's name?

BERT

Er—Oh—well, I don't think we'd better mention any *names*. Well, he was in rather of a difficulty. If you can understand me—he's been on the look-out for a well-known *burglar* for some time past. He's dead set on taking him. Well, Jack—

JENNY

Jack? Who's Jack?

BERT

My friend.

JENNY

I thought you weren't going to mention any names.

BERT

No. No, that's not his real name.

MOTHER

(*Getting mystified.*) I see.

BERT

Well Jack—I'll call him Jack, that's not his real name, you understand. Well, he was walking out with a young lady, and in the 'abit of going to her place to *supper*, much the same as I do to *tea* here.

MOTHER

I see.

BERT

Well, last time he went there—to *supper*—who should he see but the very man he was looking for!

EFF

Hiding?

BERT

Hiding? No! Sitting down to tea—supper—as bold as brass and great pals with the family. Fancy, there was Henery—

JENNY

Jack!

BERT

I mean Jack. There was Jack sitting on one side of the table, and there was the—forger on the other!

MOTHER

I see.

JENNY

The forger?

BERT

Yes.

JENNY

You said he was a burglar.

BERT

Yes, I just called him that so as to—so as to—oh, well, it's only an imaginary instance, you know.

MOTHER

I see.

JENNY

Imaginary? Why, I thought it had happened to your friend and that you wanted Mother to—

BERT

Yes, that's it. (*To Mother.*) Well, what do you think?

MOTHER

(*Nonplussed.*) I think it was very surprising.

BERT

No, that's not what I mean. What ought he to do?

MOTHER

Run away.

BERT

(*Amazed.*) Run away! Who?

MOTHER

The burglar. Isn't that what burglars generally do?

BERT

No, no, no! I mean—what ought my friend *to* do?

MOTHER

I see.

ANNIE

Why, arrest him.

BERT

No, as a matter of etiquette. He's a guest, remember. Is it etiquette for one guest to arrest another guest under the roof of a mutual friend?

MOTHER

Oh, put in that light—no. Hospitality—

MABEL

But the burglar might be there to steal.

BERT

Oh, he wasn't a burglar really. Nothing of the sort.

MOTHER

I see, quite so.

JENNY

Wipe your forehead, Bert. All that talking has made you hot. Aren't you thirsty?

ANNIE

More tea, Bert?

BERT

No, thanks.

JENNY

(*Understanding.*) Of course mother knows best about etiquette, but do you know what I should advise your friend to do if he ever meets the burglar at his friend's house again?

BERT

No. What?

JENNY

He needn't make an upset, but he might hang about outside and arrest the burglar when he comes out.

BERT

By Jove, Jenny, you're a genius. I'll tell What's-his-name—Well, so long as I don't mention his real name it doesn't much matter what I call him, does it?

MABEL

Why, George, you've let your tea get stone-cold.

ANNIE

Oh, it's because I put sugar into it. I'm so sorry.

GEORGE

It doesn't matter. I didn't really want another cup. (*Crosses to fire-place L.*)

MOTHER

Well, if everybody's finished, then.

JENNY

Bert hasn't.

BERT

Oh, yes, I have. (*Bolts tea.*)

MOTHER

Well then, I vote we go into the next room and have some music when you girls have cleared away. Bert, have you brought the "Church Parade?"

BERT

Really, I couldn't sing so soon after tea.

EFF

Nonsense, Bert. Come and help me clear away, that'll shake your tea down.

BERT

(*Jumping up.*) Certainly. Always pleased to be of use.

[*Bert fetches tray from sideboard. Annie, Mabel and Eff help to collect cups and place them on tray. Bert carries it to door but hesitates. Eff is gathering up cloth.*

BERT

(*From door.*) Don't you bother to bring that along, Ethel, make the men do the work for once—make George bring it.

EFF

It doesn't go downstairs. (*Puts cloth in sideboard.*)

BERT

(*Still hesitating.*) This tray is rather overfull, don't you think?

EFF

Not particularly.

BERT

I feel every second as if that sugar-basin was going to pitch off. Here, grab it, will you?

[*Eff takes sugar-basin from tray.*

JENNY

You're a lot of use, Bert.

BERT

I shall learn in time. Perhaps, George, if you wouldn't mind bringing along the sugar-basin—

ANNIE

Oh, no. I will.

BERT

No, no. Let George. Why should you girls do all the work?

JENNY

He-ar, he-ar! That's just what George was saying before you came in. Now's your chance, George!

[*George angrily takes sugar-basin and follows Bert out at door.*

ANNIE

I don't believe George liked doing it.

EFF

It'll do him good.

MOTHER

What a nice, thoughtful, young man Halbert is. And how fond he seems to be of George!

JENNY

Very.

EFF

Where are some matches? I'll light up in the other room.

[*Bert and George re-enter.*

EFF

Got any matches, Bert?

[*Bert gives her a box, she goes through folding doors into inner room, leaving door behind her open. Bert puts his chair back up stage. A light shows in inner room.*

MOTHER

(*Rising, replaces chair near fire.*) Eff will have to play for you. I want to listen.

[*Goes into inner room.*

EFF

(*Speaking from inner room.*) Can't Annie?

ANNIE

(*Awkwardly.*) You know I—

MABEL

Oh, it's no use having Annie to play. She always goes wrong.

JENNY

(*Rising and putting her hand on Bert's arm.*) Well, you couldn't do much better.

MABEL

(*Coldly.*) I have never tried.

JENNY

Come on, Bert. Eff's good enough for you, eh?

[*Jenny and Bert join Mother and Eff in inner room.*

MABEL

Aren't you coming, Annie?

[*Annie rises.*

GEORGE

No, Annie, stop and talk to me.

MABEL

Oh, very well, if you want to stop and spoon. I shouldn't have thought Annie was much of a one for that sort of thing.

[*Goes into inner room and starts to close door.*

BERT

(*From inner room.*) Don't close the door, Mabe. It's—

MABEL

Annie and George want— (*Bangs door.*)

[*As soon as the door is closed, George goes up and quickly locks it, then puts an arm around Ann and brings her down to large arm-chair. He places her in it.*

GEORGE

Annie. If I asked you to go away with me now, what would you say?

ANNIE

George—I—What do you mean?

GEORGE

(*Theatrically.*) I won't give you up. Nothing shall make me give you up!

[*Looks obviously at door.*

ANNIE

I don't understand.

GEORGE

I'll tell you as quickly as I can. You heard what that man Bert said.

ANNIE

Bert?

GEORGE

About the criminal and the policeman who was looking for him meeting at the same table. He meant me, *me!*

ANNIE

You? Oh, I don't understand!

GEORGE

I am trying to tell you. I am in danger. The police are looking for me.

ANNIE

George!

GEORGE

Oh, I am innocent. Surely I don't need to tell you that. But things look black against me. I must keep out of their clutches for the present. I must go. Will you come with me?

ANNIE

(*Confused.*) I—I—

GEORGE

Or will you go back on me when I'm in trouble? Quick, yes or no?

ANNIE

Yes, yes, I'll come. (*Rising.*)

GEORGE

You'll never regret it, I swear it. We must be off while he's still in there. Have you—have you got the money?

ANNIE

Oh, yes. I drew it out when you told me to.

It's upstairs. I'll— (*Rushes to door and exits.*)

[*The doors to inner room are rattled.*

MABEL

(*Off.*) Annie, Annie! Open the door! You've no right to lock the door.

MOTHER

(*Off.*) It can't be locked.

GEORGE

(*Going up quietly and turning key as he flings the door open.*) What's wrong? Was the door jammed?

MABEL

(*Spitefully as she enters.*) No, it was locked.

[*George speaks to those in inner room as Mabel crosses to sideboard.*

MABEL

I want to find Bert's music—

[*Annie bursts in as Mabel passes door.*

ANNIE

(*Breathlessly.*) Here it is, quick!—

[*George closes door to inner room and stands with his back against it.*

MABEL

Why, Annie—what's the matter? (*Turns to George.*) George, what—?

GEORGE

It's nothing, Mabe. Annie—

ANNIE

We'd better tell her, dear. She can keep Bert in there until we're gone.

MABEL

Gone ?

GEORGE

No—Annie—

ANNIE

Yes, dear. (*To Mabel.*) George must get away before Bert comes back in here. You heard what Bert said at tea about the—criminal his friend was looking for.

MABEL

Yes.

[*George moves left of table.*

ANNIE

Well, Bert thinks George is someone he is looking for, and he'll arrest him if—

[*Mabel looks at Annie for a moment, then suddenly understanding she gives a scream which both hush down, and then hysterically rushes to door, which she tries to hold. George draws her away from door. She clings to him.*

MABEL

Oh, George—they mustn't take you—it would kill me!

GEORGE

They'll hear you. Be quiet.

MABEL

(*Not noticing his interruption.*) It would! It would kill me! You must get away—(*Sobs unrestrainedly.*)

ANNIE

Mabel, Mabel!

MABEL

It's all very well to say "Mabel!"

ANNIE

Mabel, be quiet—you will—

MABEL

How can I be quiet with poor George in danger?

ANNIE

If I can—

MABEL

You! You don't care!

GEORGE

Hush, Mabel.

MABEL

She doesn't or she couldn't be so calm over it. She doesn't love you.

ANNIE

(*Quietly.*) Mabel. Do *you*? I'm so sorry, dear.

MABEL

I don't want your beastly pity. Yes, I do love him and he loves me.

GEORGE

Mabel, for goodness' sake—

MABEL

He does. He's told me so.

ANNIE

Told you so?

[*Annie speaks very quietly from this point.*

GEORGE

Oh, come. I've just chaffed Mabel a bit. I treated her as a child. You know I love you, Annie dear.

ANNIE

No, I don't know it. I never knew it really. How could you love me? I wanted your love, and I prayed for your love, and when you told me you loved me I tried to think that I was happy, but I never believed it—never. I tried to, so hard.

GEORGE

Believe me, Annie, you are wrong.

ANNIE

I'm always wrong, always wrong! Muddle-Annie! Why did you say you loved me? I never could think.

GEORGE

I did love you. I do. Aren't I waiting to take you with me now?

MABEL

(*Drying her eyes and trying to be practical.*) No, George, it is time we told Ann the truth. You have been very noble, but I cannot let you sacrifice yourself.

GEORGE

(*Angrily.*) I tell you to be quiet.

ANNIE

(*Coming to chair above table and sitting with her arms upon table.*) No. Let her say what she wants to.

MABEL

He never loved you. He only asked you to marry him because he was sorry for you.

GEORGE

(*Above table.*) Annie, I—

ANNIE

(*Raising her head.*) Hush, George. Go on, Mabel.

MABEL

(*Somewhat abashed by what she has said.*) And then when I came home he fell in love with me.

ANNIE

He told you so?

MABEL

Yes, at last. He said he'd made a mistake—

ANNIE

(*Stopping her.*) Thank you, Mabe. I—I'm sorry.

GEORGE

You don't believe her?

ANNIE

Yes, I do. I'm sorry.

GEORGE

Well, if you do, let me prove how wrong you are. Come with me now. We can still get away.

ANNIE

No, I understand. You are very good, but I don't want—

GEORGE

(*Crossing to door and opening it.*) I'm afraid I can't risk waiting, then.

MABEL

(*Rushing to him.*) Oh George, don't go!

GEORGE

My dear, you don't want to see your friend Bert arrest me, do you?

MABEL

Oh, take me with you then—You were going to take Annie.

GEORGE

(*Trying to disengage himself.*) I'll write to you as soon as I'm safe somewhere. I can't take you. I've no money—barely enough even for myself.

ANNIE

(*Smiling sadly.*) Oh, George, what was the use of trying to pretend you didn't care? Mabel!

[*Mabel turns. Annie holds out the money which she has brought downstairs with her.*

MABEL

What is it?

ANNIE

My money. I shan't want it any more. Take it. Good-bye. George, be good to her.

[*Makes Mabel take money.*

GEORGE

Annie, you are too good.

[*Reaches past Mabel and takes Annie's hand.*

MABEL

Oh, hurry! Bert may come out.

ANNIE

Yes, go and put on your hat. You can buy what else you want. Be quick.

[*Mabel runs out. Bert is heard in inner room commencing song.*

ANNIE

Which way will you go? Please tell me, I can put them off if I know.

GEORGE

Tram to Prince of Wales' and then train somewhere from Westbourne Park. I don't know where.

ANNIE

Oh, well, you'll be safe away by then.

[*Re-enter Mabel in hat and coat.*

MABEL

I'm ready. Good-bye, Ann. I'm sorry if I was a pig.

ANNIE

Good-bye.

[*They go out at door. Song continues within. Annie stands for a moment unsteadily leaning against table, then takes off hat and flings it on table. The outer door bangs. The song in the inner room suddenly stops. Annie turns and faces folding doors as Bert flings them open, disclosing others starting up in surprise.*

EFF

(*Off.*) Bert, whatever is the matter?

MOTHER

(*Just visible through doors.*) Halbert!

BERT

(*Coming into room. Down L. of table.*) Where's everybody gone? Hullo, I didn't see you, Ann.

[*Jenny, Mother and Eff come through doors into room.*

EFF

What's wrong, Bert? Why did you break off like that?

BERT

Did the front door go?

MOTHER

I didn't notice it.

ANNIE

Neither did I.

JENNY

Where's Mabel?

BERT

(*Going round to door.*) Where's that fellow gone—Rose—where's he gone?

ANNIE

I don't know.

JENNY

Annie, your eyes are red. (*Comes towards Annie.*) What's wrong?

ANNIE

Nothing.

JENNY

(*Loudly.*) Bert, he's gone! He understood.

MOTHER

Who?

EFF

Understood?

JENNY

Oh, didn't you see? George was the man Bert told us about at tea under another name. He understood if you didn't, and he's bolted.

EFF

Was he, Bert?

BERT

Yes. [*Starts for door.*

ANNIE

(*Starting forward.*) It's no use, Bert, he—he had a cab. He's a long way away by now—

BERT

A cab? Still, I can give the word.

ANNIE

He's safe away. Oh don't—

BERT

Really, Annie, I don't see how I can neglect my duty.

JENNY

(*Loudly.*) But where's Mabel?

MOTHER

(*Goes to armchair L. of table.*) Mabel.

BERT

Good God, he hasn't taken her with him, has he?

EFF

Bert! Why should he?

BERT

ANSWER. HAS HE?

ANNIE

Yes, but they're away by now.

BERT

Good Lord, can you stand there and see your sister carried away by that man? Which way did they go?

ANNIE

She went because she wanted to.

BERT

Of course she did. They all do. Do you know what we are after him for? Just that!

BIGAMY. (*Dinning the fact into her word by word.*) Eloping with girls and then dropping them when he's got their money out of them.

JENNY

Oh, Ann. Tell us which way they've gone.

[*Annie falls to the ground limply.*

EFF

(*Going quickly to her.*) Mind out, Bert. Frightening her to death! Here, hold up Ann. For goodness' sake don't look like that. Tell us which way they went. She's fainted. Sit down and keep quiet, Mother. It'll be alright.

[*Attends to Ann.*

MOTHER

Oh, Mabe, Mabe!

[*Sits in chair below table and rocks herself to and fro.*

[*Bert and Jenny open door and go out, a cab whistle is heard and two blasts on a police whistle.*

EFF

Now, gently, Annie. (*Lifts Annie's head to her knee and strokes her forehead.*)

[*Bert returns to room anxious but patient.*

BERT

Has she spoken yet?

EFF

One moment. (*To Annie.*) Annie! Annie! (*To others.*) She's better. (*To Annie.*) Ann, do please tell us—

ANNIE

(*Very faintly.*) To the trams.

EFF

To the trams? (*Ann nods.*) Quick, Bert.

[*Bert turns to door and meets Jenny and Mabel entering. Mabel is out of breath and crying. Annie scrambles to her feet and sinks into chair above table. Mother sits rigidly in chair below table looking at Mabel. Bert stands back against wall and Eff stands in doorway to inner room.*

JENNY

Here she is!

BERT

Here's Mabel!

EFF

Mabel!

MOTHER

(*After the others.*) Mabel! I'd have you know I don't hold with your walking off with burglars, Miss.

[*Eff, Annie and Jenny laugh hysterically.*

EFF

Mother, don't. Where's George?

MABEL

He—I couldn't keep up with him. We heard a police whistle, and he started running, and I ran too, and then we thought we heard some one following us, and when we reached the trams there was one starting and George jumped on to it, it—it wouldn't stop—I couldn't—I ran after it as far as I could—it wouldn't stop—I— (*Breaks down and goes crying into inner room.*)

[*The others look at each other in silence for a moment.*

JENNY

(*Very much under her breath.*) The cad.

ANNIE

(*Rising.*) Poor Mabe!

[*Annie goes into inner room.*

CURTAIN

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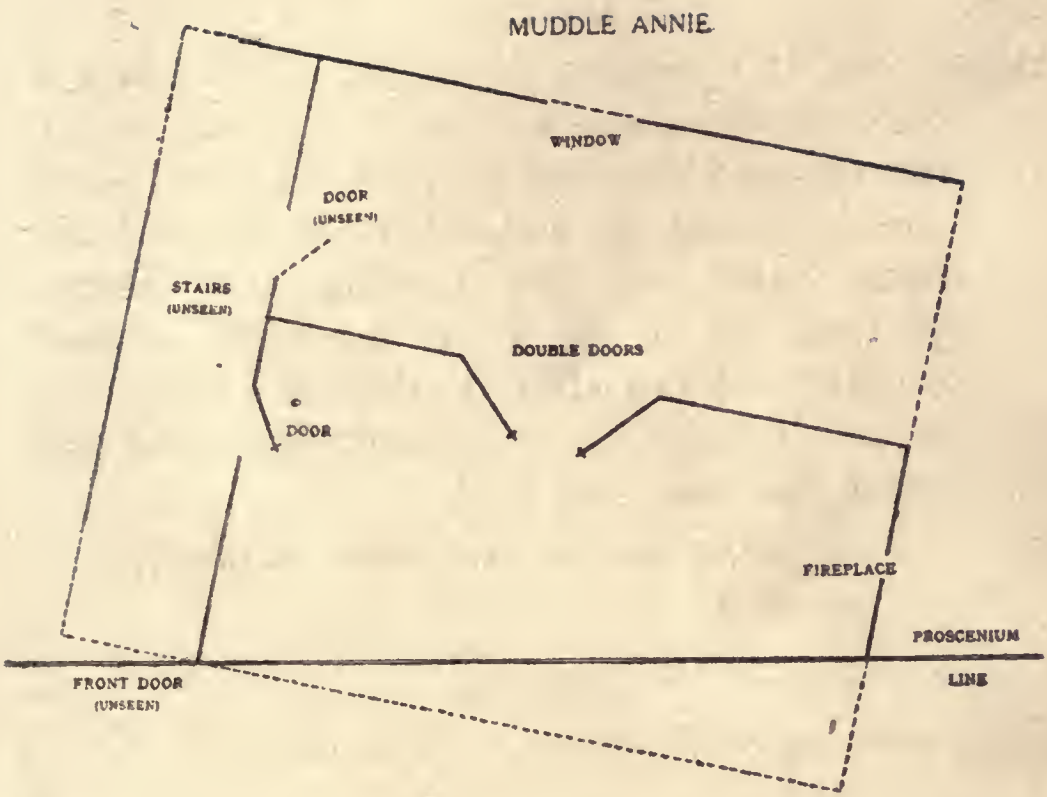

A shabby, comfortable, room with dark-red wall-paper. There is a dark-red carpet on the floor, a very large table occupies the centre. Two arm-chairs are at the fire. There is a sideboard below the door, R. Between the double and single doors—against the back wall—are chairs. Other chairs are above table, and below it. A sofa is against the back wall.

The inner room seen through the double doors is brighter and more drawing-roomy in decoration. The double doors are not necessary, but are an advantage.

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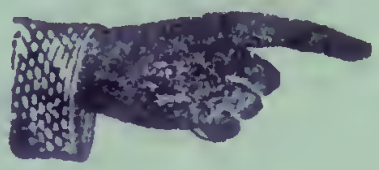

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